

How not to bore your audience: notes for tragic script writers

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We believe that we have the texts of Greek tragedies *more or less* as the great tragedians wrote them, but how can we tell how ancient audiences reacted to their performance? Did those who sat for hours on the stone steps of the Theatre of Dionysus at Athens or in the theatre at Thorikos (see Alastair Blanshard's piece in this volume) react in the same way that modern audiences react? Our best guide to such questions is provided by marginal commentaries or 'scholia' that survive in some of our medieval manuscripts of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides. These scholia might not look promising at first sight (they are often scrappy and all are anonymous), but they actually have quite a lot to tell us about likes and dislikes of ancient spectators, listeners and readers over many centuries of antiquity. A few of their sources may go back as early as the fourth century B.C., but most reflect later times, when some of the plays were studied in schools. They tend to be respectful of these famous 'classics', but they don't represent the views of a single author or period, and sometimes they contradict one another: Euripides, for example, turned out in the end to be the most popular of all the ancient tragedians, but the notes include quite a few swipes at him, going back to the days when audiences found him shocking.

All I have done below is to turn these scholia or comments on different passages into a list of hints for dramatists.

1. Don't waste time:

Don't give the same piece of information/ tell the same story/play the same scene twice. The point of this is that there's nothing worse than allowing the tension to drop. Having Character A repeat in detail what Character B has said isn't a good idea: drama needs to be faster-paced and more economical than life.

The notes often praise a dramatist for 'avoiding delay', or 'not boring the spectators' with information they already know: so they approve of the Athenian chorus in Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus* not needing to be told who the 'son of Laius' is: they've all heard what Oedipus did to his father and mother, and the action can concentrate on their horror when they discover that the blind and beggarly old man who has come to them as an asylum-seeker is Oedipus himself.

It wasn't, of course, that audiences didn't like long speeches: these were the real highlights in the ancient theatre, and actors sometimes even padded the speeches with lines of their own. But the big speeches typically come at high points in the action, when a messenger, for example, describes some terrible event, like Oedipus blinding himself in *Oedipus the King*, which takes 75 lines, with only three short questions from the chorus, or when two characters launch into a tremendous quarrel, like Jason and Medea in Euripides (who each get over fifty continuous lines as well as plenty of cut-and-thrust dialogue).

2. Don't make the plot too complicated

A well made plot won't have any unnecessary episodes. There is very little sign of interest in sub-plots in tragedy, and plays could be criticised for having too many incidents. One of the

'hypotheses' (introductory notes) to Euripides' *Phoenician Women*, preserved along with the scholia, is quite disapproving about the plot being 'overfull', and singles out three scenes as unnecessary or pointless. But even this critic says the play is 'fine as regards visual effects', and in fact it was one of the most popular of Euripides' plays for centuries. Evidently sensationalism, or overdoing it, was in the eye of the beholder, and tastes varied over time. Another preface to the same play praises the emotional appeal of its many terrible incidents, which include Creon's son sacrificing himself for the city by hurling himself from the ramparts, Oedipus' two boys killing themselves in battle and then their mother, Jocasta, committing suicide over their corpses, and Oedipus and Antigone's exile.

3. Don't lower the tone

Avoid anything that will strike the audience as sensational or vulgar (*phortikon*), or more comic than tragic. Nor, however, should the action be too 'frigid' (*psuchron*) – 'moving the theatre' is what dramatists and actors are for. But it's all a matter of how far you can go. One note on *Oedipus the King* (on 264) implies that Sophocles had a tendency to overplay the irony of Oedipus not knowing who his father was as a cheap trick deliberately to 'arouse the theatre'. It goes on to say that it was Euripides who did this all the time.

The question of what you should show on stage was particularly problematic, and I don't suppose the author of the admiring note on *Phoenician Women* (quoted above) would have liked it if all those events had been acted out for the audience; in fact they saw none of them except Oedipus and Antigone going into exile. There is a note on Sophocles' *Electra* 1404, where the killing of Clytemnestra by her son Orestes (offstage, of course) is not reported to the audience; instead we hear Clytemnestra's cries from indoors and Electra onstage shouting to Orestes 'Strike again if you have the strength!' The commentator remarks that by not bringing on a messenger Sophocles avoids 'holding up the action': it's Electra's reaction that has most power to move the audience, and Clytemnestra's cries make the scene vivid, but without the 'vulgarity of the spectacle'. What he means, I think, is that showing a son killing his mother would be grossly offensive (too 'in ya face'?), but the sound of her cries while the murder is happening gives us a sense of 'being there', and doing without a messenger makes the whole scene intensely concentrated.

4. Do find ways of thrilling the audience

The notes often comment on effects they admire: the 'ambiguity' in *Oedipus the King* that 'delights' the audience (928), or stunning visual effects like the tableau of the bloodstained Ajax among the piles of slaughtered cattle (Sophocles, *Ajax* 334) or the blind Oedipus leading the way unaided to the place where he must die 'as if guided by the god' (*Oedipus at Colonus* 1547).

The commentators don't have much to say about the contribution actors can make, and sometimes they suspect them of adding lines of their own, but there is a nice example (on *Ajax* 864) of the way they could adjust both to suicide shown on stage

(not what you'd expect in Sophocles) and to what an actor can do to make it work for the audience: 'The impression must be given that he falls on his sword, and a strong actor is needed to make the audience imagine Ajax doing it. This is what Timotheos of Zakynthos was famous for; his acting had such a compelling effect on spectators that he was given the nickname 'Slayer'' (which is what Ajax calls his sword at 815).

All of these comments (opinions of anonymous individuals though they may be) give us an insight into how Greek tragedy was received in antiquity and later. Who knows? In one thousand years time, scholars might be using our annotated texts and theatre-programmes to work out what we think of the plays of Euripides and Sophocles.

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